The Great Polish Anxiety: Watching Netflix’s _High Water_

When a natural catastrophe approaches your home and family, you must be anxious. But what if anxiety is your life’s organizational principle? (Warning: Spoilers ahead)

Episode 2. The main character is walking to her mother’s apartment when she notices a renovation of the building’s façade. In front of her, just before the entrance to the building, two construction workers are lifting supplies on a pulley. “You can go ahead, madam,” one of them assures her, “this old German pulley will hold.” “But the rope seems to be Polish, isn’t it?” she responds. “The rope’s Polish,” the worker confirms as the main character takes her chance and ventures into the building.

Available on Netflix in the original Polish, with English subtitles, as well as multiple other languages, _High Water (Wielka Woda)_ is a well-crafted story about the late 1990s in Poland and its liminal position in the region, stuck between fossilized, hierarchical structures that serve as a compass for the broader public and new currents that struggle to reach the mainstream.[1] All these are personified in the series’ main character, female hydrologist Jaśmina Tremer (played by Agnieszka Żulewska). Throughout the six episodes, we witness the main heroine’s quest to minimize the effect of an incoming flood while attempting to promote rational thinking, with varying results. The outcome is a clash of attitudes, worldviews, and perspectives that cannot be reconciled—at least not in the short time left before the disaster.

Twenty-five years ago, a giant flood, dubbed the “flood of the millennium” (Pol. powódź tysiąclecia), hit Wrocław, now Poland’s third-largest city located on the Oder River roughly three hours away from Dresden and just under four hours from Warsaw and Prague. Heavy rainfall in early July 1997 caused the Oder and its tributaries to overflow in Czechia (where it rises) and Poland, carrying flood waves toward the unexpecting city. Unprepared for what was about to happen, the authorities and locals confronted a head-on clash that left over one hundred people dead in both countries and cost 4.5 billion dollars in damage. While the catastrophe looms large, _High Water_ also includes a realistic depiction of life at the time. In particular, episode 1 would make a good example for showcasing the time period in a contemporary history, sociology, political science, or Polish studies class. The streets, cars, attire, and even neighborhood stores filled with the sound of radio all reflect the experience of living in late 1990s Poland, shortly before its incorporation into
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union structures.

The Netflix series adapts the historical flood to tell a story about people whose irrational ways of acting and thinking predestine them to an impending catastrophe. Inspired by HBO’s Chernobyl (2019), the series was viewed by ten million users in the first seven days since its release, and it boasts a solid 82 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes.[2] High Water was directed by Jan Holoubek, praised for his 2020 drama 25 Years of Innocence (25 lat niewinności: Sprawa Tomka Komendy) and the 2018 TV series The Mire (Rojst), and Bartłomiej Ignaciuk. The series portrays post-communist Poland made up of people who obediently rely on authorities and hierarchies, habitually stick to the old ways, avoid responsibility, and at times favor anarchic particularism with immediate gratification over the long-term well-being of everyone.

It is in such circumstances that we get to know the series’ protagonist. While conducting research in the Vistula’s delta in northern Poland, Tremer witnesses a deer kill and, furious, snatches the hunter’s ID before being flown across the country to Wroclaw to discuss a flood danger with local officials. Among those gathered is a chief of police, two army officials, and two hydrology experts: Professor Jan Nowak and his lackey Dr. Piepka. Tremer’s arduous swim upstream, or against established hierarchies and authorities, begins from this very moment. “We really don’t need any of your support,” reveals Nowak, immediately followed by Piepka who supports his boss and says, “I don’t know if you’ve heard of the study by Professor Nowak, Alluvial Fans and Regulating Flood Control of Rivers in Their Lower Course,” which he deems a “groundbreaking work in flood control.” “But Wroclaw is in the middle course of the river,” Tremer quips, setting the tone for future interactions.

Sporting a Hard Rock Café T-shirt or a black-and-white St. Pauli jacket with a head skull symbol, Tremer is a triple—if not a multiple—outsider in the series. As a young, female scientist with a PhD from Utrecht University in the Netherlands (and not a Polish university, as Piepka accusingly reminds her), she represents a true inside outsider who speaks the same language as the locals but whose mental patterns radically differ. In this anthropological manner, Tremer embarks on a mission to save the city from the unavoidable catastrophe—or to save people from their predicaments that endanger their stable future as much as the impending flood. While the river’s flow can be altered, ossified cognitive schemas are much harder to hollow out, she discovers.

The refusal to give in to the old ways of doing things, including following preestablished hierarchies, characterizes Tremer’s interactions with the people in the series. Not only does her character exhibit contrarian thinking, but it also magnifies the conservatism—in the sense of preserving traditional practices—of those she encounters on this odyssey. Colonel Czacki is a case in point. A few days before the flood, Tremer patrols the Oder riverbanks with Czacki and notices that the flood control system in place, established after the disastrous flood of 1903, is inadequate. What follows is a conversation that captures Tremer’s anxiety, neutralized by Czacki’s irrational statement. Tremer: “So what are these trees still doing here?” Czacki: “Well, you know. They’ve always been here.” Tremer: “Uh-huh.” Czacki: “Besides, don’t you think the place looks pretty with them?”

On another occasion, Tremer tries to convince locals from a village near Wroclaw, the last stop for the flood before it enters the city, to leave their houses and let the army blow up the flood banks to minimize the flood wave’s impact. Her appeals, however, fall on deaf ears. Tremer: “I’m telling you, Wroclaw won’t survive if we don’t do anything. It just won’t!” Villager: “If this was a floodplain, the Germans wouldn’t have built their houses here. And yet they did.”
The resistance against what the locals perceive as an encroachment pushes them to secure the flood banks in the village. As they listen to a TV broadcast announcing that the flood wave has grown in size, their informal leader, Andrzej Rębacz, calms them down as if trying to lift their spirits before the wave hits the village. “People! Don’t be afraid. If the water is a meter over the banks, we’ll stack sandbags one meter and ten centimeters! If the water level is two meters higher, we’ll stack the damn sandbags even higher than that,” Rębacz says. Even if reluctantly, people obediently follow.

Downplaying the potential danger is a common theme that runs through the series. In the opening scene, city officials openly joke about the possible flood and point to the weather that says otherwise. “What flood?” the province’s governor chuckles. “It’s not raining. There’s a drought, right?” Czacki adds, moments after discussing the preparations for the pope’s upcoming visit. At a later meeting with city officials, Tremer cannot get an exact answer about the current water levels in the city. “Do we even know today’s water levels?” she asks, and her question precedes a sequence of uncertainty expressed by three meeting participants, none of whom is willing to provide exact data. “Alarm levels are slightly exceeded,” says one. “Well, not so slightly. By several centimeters,” adds another. Pressed by Tremer to reveal the numbers, yet another participant adds: “Just slightly.” Tremer sighs and continues pressing only to realize that the prognosis put forward is based on 1960s data. “You undermine everything,” reacts Nowak as the atmosphere grows tense.

The many characters’ seemingly undisturbed attitude toward the possible flooding of Wrocław stands in stark contrast with Tremer’s anxious, repeated calls for action in the face of danger. The more she seems concerned with what is about to happen, the calmer her interlocutors seem, which builds the viewers’ anxiety even further. From the very start, it is anxiety that drives Tremer in her quest to save what can be saved—and her quest extends beyond the incoming catastrophe. As the lone heroine, and the only character capable of foreseeing the immediate future, she faces a whole gamut of anxieties as a rationality-driven female scientist and outsider in a men-dominated world. While initially summoned to advise on the possible natural danger, Tremer evolves into a character who has to battle more than she expected: water, hierarchies, people, irrationality, and incorrect data.

These fears, palpable in each episode, eventually make up *High Water*’s grand theme—anxiety. Poland in the series is a land of anxieties that resurface in times of crisis. There is anxiety about hierarchical structures and breaking away from them. There is performance-related anxiety about competence (or lack thereof), exemplified by Czacki who does little himself and delegates everything to his subordinates. There is anxiety about reversing the course of already established modes of thinking and ways of being that seem to exist since time immemorial. There is anxiety about preserving the little people have—even at the price of damage to other people’s possessions. Then there is anxiety about incompetent officials, short-sighted planners, cynical politicians, inept middle managers, disdaining experts, unreliable coworkers, and emotional leaders. Finally, there is anxiety about being disbelieved (Tremer), uprooted (Rębacz), unseated (deputy minister), ridiculed (Tremer’s mother), blocked from further advancement (acting province governor), or knocked off the pedestal of expertise (Nowak). All this, naturally, in addition to the anxiety of living in a country that is safe, stable, and predictable—but only to a degree, until the next high water arrives.

Notes

[1]. *High Water* (*Wielka woda*) is available in the original Polish and Dutch with English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Filipino, Finnish,
French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Swedish, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese subtitles. Each episode is about 45 minutes long.


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland

**Citation:** Krzysztof E. Borowski. Review of Holoubek, Jan; Ignaciuk, Bartłomiej, dirs, *High Water (Wielka Woda).* H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. July, 2023.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58619

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.